

gobar times

ISSUE NO: 264, May 1-31, 2024

A DOWN TO EARTH SUPPLEMENT FOR THE YOUNG AND CURIOUS

Love you, Honey!



Explore the
buzzing world of
honeybees and
how these tiny
heroes help our
planet thrive!

The Bees, the Bears, and the Kattunayakans



Stan Thekaekara

A fascinating narrative by grandpa Marigan to a curious child, discovering the sacred traditions of the Kattunayakan tribe and how it honours the bees, the bears, and trees for honey.



Supplement Editor: Souparno Banerjee Senior Creative Director: Ajit Bajaj Supplement Editorial Coordinator: Anubhuti Sharma Design: Ritika Bohra Illustrations: Yogendra Anand Cover Design: Ritika Bohra Production: Rakesh Srivastava, Surender Singh, Gundhar Das Email: young@downtoearth.org.in Snail Mail: Centre for Science and Environment, 41, Tughlakabad Institutional Area, New Delhi-110062



Marigan teaching school children about bees.

Banni baba, nange Kaddu ke hogu. Namma Kaddu ge nange hogu baba.

(Translating from Kattunayakan language for clarity: "Come my brother, let us go to the forest. Let us go to OUR forest brother.")

This is the rallying call of the village elder when he invites his companions to join him in going to the forest to collect honey among other things.

Marigan, the wise old Kattunayakan elder from Chembakolli village in the Gudalur Valley of the Nilgiris, has been collecting wild honey from the time he was a child. What he does not know about honey is not worth knowing. And I was fortunate to be able to sit on his many sessions where he shared his knowledge with children and others.

Marigan: Come children, gather around. I will tell you about the ancient practices of the Kattunayakans and their special relationship with the bees.

Child: Yes. We have heard our teachers in our Adivasi school also tell us that we, Kattunayakans,

have a special relationship with bees and honey. What is this, Grandpa Marigan?

Marigan: Well, it's like this. Kattunayakans always lived in the forest. That's why we are called the Lords of the Jungle. And we depended on what the forest gave us for food. Honey was one of our major sources of food. But we knew that others in the forest, like the bears, also depend on honey. So, we made a pact between the bees, the bears, and the trees that housed the bee hives and us, Kattunayakans.

Child: What is a pact, Grandpa?

Marigan: It is an agreement or an understanding between all of us. First, the bee goes to the tree and asks for permission to build a hive. She tells the tree, it will be a big hive and there will be thousands of us bees in the hive. If the tree says yes, then she reminds it, "Once I start building, other bees will also come and build hives. Is that alright?" If the tree says okay she then asks, "But,

Kattunayakans made a pact between the bees, the bears, and the trees that housed the bee hives, and themselves.

Cover Story



We ask the bees to forgive us because we are taking their honey but we promise not to hurt their babies and not to destroy their hive so that they can build again.

you know, it is not only us bees but also the bears and finally these Kattunayakan fellows who will come and climb your branches to take our honey. Is that okay too?" And only after the tree says okay, the bee will build her hive on that tree.

Child: But Grandpa, do trees sometimes say, no?

Marigan: Of course! That is why there are no hives on some trees and only one hive on some trees and 20 or 30 hives on some other trees. That's because sometimes the trees don't give permission, sometimes give permission only for one or two hives, and sometimes say, "You can build as many hives as you want – I am big and strong." But we realized that if the bears also go

for the honey then we may end up fighting with each other.

So, we told the bears: listen, we will take the risk of climbing the tall trees and will take the honey but we will leave the wax for you. So, don't trouble us when we go and take the honey. And that is why we don't bring the wax out of the forest but leave it there because it is the bear's share.

Child: But do all the bears know this?

Marigan: We can't be sure. So, that is why when we go to collect honey, we first do a puja. To all the spirits of the forest to protect us, and to the trees and to the bees and to the bears.

We ask the trees to forgive us for climbing up their branches and we promise to be careful not to break them and hurt the trees. So, please don't drop us when we are at the top. We ask the bees to forgive us because we are taking their honey but we promise not to hurt their babies and not to destroy their hive so that they can build again. So, please don't sting us when we come. And to the bears we say—see, we promised you that we will leave the wax so please don't attack us when we take the honey. We will share with you.

Only after this puja we go and collect the honey. That's why Kattunayakans, don't fall from the trees even when we climb very high and the bees don't sting us when we collect the honey, or the bears don't attack us. Because we have an agreement which is centuries old!

Child: But Grandpa, why undergo all this trouble? Can't we just buy honey from the shop?

Marigan: Of course you can, my child! But that honey is very different. That is from the bees that live in boxes, which are owned by people who sometimes feed the bees with sugar to make the honey sweeter. And I am told that some big companies even add sugar syrup to their honey.

Our honey is natural, pure, wild honey and is not easily available in the shops. And many people like our honey. That is why we now sell it under the name THE THIRD SHARE. That is, one share for the bees and nature, one share for us, and only the third share is available to the people who want to buy it. Because now, too many people are destroying the forests and nature unthinkingly. They have too much money and want to make even more! They take everything from the forest and even from the land underneath and don't give anything back.

If we don't protect the earth, if we don't protect the forests, how can we live? How can we be 'Lords of the Forest' if there is no forest!? And bees play a very important role in protecting our forest. They fly from flower to flower, pollinating all the flowers. To make one kilo of honey, they visit about four million flowers! Nothing can match this hard work. The pollinated flowers become fruits, the fruits produce seeds, the seeds fall to the ground or are carried by birds to other parts of the forest. And from the seeds, new trees grow. That's how we make sure that our forests continue to live. And bees are the key to this chain.

Let me tell you something noteworthy: From the time I was a child, I have never seen a dead bee. Because when a bee dies, it is so small that we can't even see it on the ground. But now we see a lot of dead bees. Because in the tea and coffee estates, the farmers spray chemical pesticides to kill what they call 'weeds'. But many of these weeds have flowers, which provide pollen for the bees to make honey. When they sit on these flowers sprayed with pesticide, they die.

THE THIRD SHARE means that one share is for the bees and nature, one share is for us, and the third share is available to the people who want to buy it.



And so, now, we see cluster of dead bees lying here and there! This feels very sad.

Child: How do you know so much about the bees, Grandpa Marigan? Do they talk to you?

Marigan: Of course! But you have to listen very carefully. They talk to us through their humming. From the different kinds of hums, we know whether they are angry, whether they are playing with their babies and teaching them to fly, whether they are happy because they have found a lot of flowers, and whether they are going home after a day's work. From their humming, they tell us where they have built their hives, so that we can visit them. And only when we are sure that they have made all the honey they can and there is a little extra, we climb the trees to take it.

The author is a Founder of Just Change India and Co-Founder of ACCORD, Nilgiris district, Tamil Nadu.

Cover Story

MEET THE BEE FAMILY

A buzzing catalogue of some important bee-types—the rock bee, little bee, Indian hive bee, European bee, and dammer bee.

Stan Thekaekara



1. The Rock Bee: This is a big bee that makes gigantic hives. And more than a lakh bees live in them. They build their hives in cities also and you can spot them under balconies, etc. They produce the largest amount of honey—more than 35 kg from a comb in a year!

2. The European Bee: These bees are not native to India and were brought from Italy. They are the second largest bees after the Rock bees.

3. The Indian Hive Bee: These bees are bigger than the Little bees but smaller than the Rock bees. They produce about 6–8 kilos of honey. They have been domesticated and are reared in bee boxes.

4. The Little Bee: This is one of the smallest bees apart from the Dammer bee. They build honey combs within rock crevices, tree holes, and even on the ground. But they produce only about a kilo of honey in a year.

5. The Dammer Bee: The Kattunayakans call them mosquito bees because they are so small. Being so tiny, they have to visit many, many flowers to get the required pollen. They build tiny hives and produce only about 100 grams of honey per hive. But their honey is believed to have the most medicinal value. They are also great pollinators. The interesting thing about them is that they don't sting!

Bees do a lot of work and play a vital role in protecting our planet. While people don't necessarily hunt bees, various practices—like spraying chemicals, poisoning the flowers they visit on, and polluting the air—is endangering them. But they are undoubtedly our biggest friends and we should do all that we can to rescue them. Don't you agree?

*The author is a Founder of
Just Change India and
Co-Founder of ACCORD,
Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu.*



Bee-lieve It or Not!

How many eyes do honeybees have?

Bees have **FIVE EYES AND SIX LEGS.**



How many flowers do honeybees have to visit to get a kilo of honey?

About **40 LAKH** flowers. But one bee makes only about 1/12th of a teaspoon of honey in her lifetime. So, you need thousands of bees to make a kilo of honey.



How long does honey last?

FOREVER. Natural honey if preserved properly without contamination can last forever. Archaeologists have found 3,000 year old honey in the tomb of deceased pharaoh King Tut in the pyramids of Egypt!



How do honeybees share information with each other?

By **DANCING.** They do a figure of 8 dance called the 'waggle dance'. Through this dance, they tell the other bees where pollen, water, etc. is available.



How often can a honeybee sting you?

Only **ONCE!** Because they have only one stinger! And they usually die after they sting you!



Why do bees make hexagons for their honey combs?

Honeybees want a shape which takes the **MINIMUM SPACE** inside their combs and yet stores the **MAXIMUM HONEY!**

Hexagons can easily store more honey than triangles, squares, or pentagons. And unlike heptagons, octagons, and so on, hexagons can even stack together wall-to-wall with one another without wasting any space in between.



A CLIMATE CHANGE SERIES

HONEY HEIST

Harvesting wild honey has been the main occupation of the Cholanayakan and Kattunayakan tribes of Wayanad, in Kerala, for centuries. But the recent drought and delayed summer rain have affected the harvesting of wild honey. The number of beehives has come down drastically, by over 50 per cent from 2023. Honeybees make hives every year on the same big trees. The right amount of rain, according to the season, is crucial for honey production. But unseasonal rain is posing a huge threat to it, affecting the tribes that depend on honey collection for their survival.